

# “History of Universalism in America”

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“We are sinners brothers and sisters, in the hand of an angry God. You think you know God, but you don’t. The only thing you can know for sure is that you are held over the fires of hell, by a small spider-like strand of string. God’s hand is holding you, willing you not to fall into that pit of fire and hell. At least for now. But, oh my children, don’t you believe for one minute that you can rest and pretend that God, while looking into your heart and seeing how you are lax, lazy and sinful and evil you really are, will be patient forever. At any moment God can easily, and could easily let go of that spider-like strand of love that holds you from the fires of hell forever. What can you do my brothers and sister? Well, there is only one thing to do. You must repent and be washed in the blood of the lamb.”

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Thus spoke Rev. Jonathan Edwards in the middle 1700’s as he and the British evangelist George Whitefield stirred up America in what they called the “Great Awakening.” But isn’t it amazing that I heard something almost like this sermon on the radio not so long ago. Is this message still around? Is it still being taught to children? Oh yes it is. And it is sad indeed when fear becomes the religious message rather than love.

This great awakening, and the message we hear from some churches today, was actually the born-again message of John Calvinists’ doctrine of predestination, or the idea that we may be damned even before we are born, therefore only church and baptism and salvation will save you. At the presentation of this sermon it was said, women fainted and men rolled on the ground and wept. Children stared forward soundless and afraid while holding their parent’s hands.

If we are to appreciate the power of the Universalists, their message and their history in our past, and the need for the Universalist message today, we must know Jonathan Edwards’ story, because the Universalists and these Calvinists fundamentalist grew up side by side in the United States, in opposition to each other, rivaling for the same people to believe their very different theologies. Their tents were set up yards from each other, in some farmer’s field, each in each other’s faces, teaching the exact opposite theologies.

As we talk today about who we are as religious people, we easily, or maybe not so easily say, we are Unitarian Universalists. The story of the Unitarians may be a story that is more familiar than the Universalists story. But, I am always amazed at what a loving, brave and glorious story it is, that is our heritage from these early Universalists.

If you go back in history, back to the beginnings of America you will see Universalism.

As two flowers grow in a garden, these two thoughts, predestination and unearned salvation, salvation that is a gift, that is assured to everyone, have grown up in the same soil, under the same sun, using the same nourishment of the same Bible. And these two ideologies have also been knocking heads for hundreds of years.

Universalism is older than Unitarianism in America. The Universalists were organized in the early 1700's with their first convention in Philadelphia in 1793. The Unitarians were not identified in the United States until 1819. An interesting part of the beginnings of the Universalist story, revolves around one family named Ballou. Hosea Ballou, born in 1771, considered the most important leader in the denomination's history, his older brother David, their grandnephew also called Hosea, and their cousin, Adin. This family almost single handedly took the reigns of Universalism in America from the founder of Universalism in America, John Murray and rode it all over the East Coast and far into the Midwest in their lifetimes.

To understand what happened next, you need to first understand John Murray. Murray was born in 1741 in Alton, England. He was brought up a strict Calvinist and suffered many psychological torments from his fear that he was foreordained to damnation. The influence of John Wesley's writings relieved that fear of damnation in some respects, and once he felt free from the harsher elements of Calvinism, he would not stop short of the total rejection of everlasting punishment for everyone.

The key to John's freedom from this worry and suffering of his life after death, was further fulfilled in a man named James Rely and his book, *Union*, written in 1759. When John heard Rely preach he was consumed in a new fire, not the fire of hell, but the fire of total, consuming love, the love of God. Murray's preaching of the Rely gospel cost him friends and social standing, and his ostracism was accompanied by several other tragedies. In one year he lost his wife and child to an illness and was beset by economic difficulties, serving time in a debtor's prison.

The ultimate answer to his problems after prison, was a trip to America, where he began his career as a Universalist preacher. And here the Universalist story begins in America, on Cranberry Inlet, New Jersey. John decided he would simply sail where God would point him, and when his ship ran aground in 1770 in New Jersey, a farmer named Thomas Potter had built a chapel on that Inlet, not knowing why. His wife and neighbors told him he was crazy, why build a chapel when there was no preacher, no congregation?

But Thomas was a stubborn man and a man who believed in that still, small voice within. And build a chapel he did. And then wouldn't you know, this ship comes and runs aground right there in his cove and who would be in the ship, but a preacher! Yes, a preacher with no chapel and no place to go in America and a chapel with no preacher, I think that's called a match made in heaven.

After preaching there for some years, John met a prominent ship captain named Winthrop Sargent who set John up in Gloucester in the first Universalist church, so named in America. Soon John fell in love and married Winthrop's daughter Judith Sargent Murray whose literary career complemented Murray's religious work.

Judith, besides being a poet, was also a strong leader in the Universalist faith and the equality of women, and who wrote an article called *On Equality of the Sexes* in 1790 for the "Massachusetts Magazine." It is believed that later in the early 1800's Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams, a Unitarian, used Judith's article when she wrote a letter to the first Continental Congress as they were drafting the Declaration of Independence, asking that women's rights be a part of the human rights as stated in the Declaration. Our Unitarian and Universalist forebears were intricately involved in the very foundations and beginnings of our government.

Basically self trained and self taught, these "new" Universalists, the Ballou men moved away from Murray's more conservative theology. In 1805 the elder Hosea Ballou wrote *A Treatise on Atonement*, here he used homey examples and sharp wit and argued that religion is to be approached through the scriptures as interpreted by reason. (I find our own slogans today reflecting that idea of Ballou in 1805, when we say our church is a church where religion and reason meet.)

Ballou insisted that God could not be inconsistent, and therefore he would not give humanity reason and then present a revelation that was incompatible with that reason. Fundamental to his argument was the insistence that God is not a wrathful deity, but rather a loving God; therefore Christ came not to atone for some ancient, infinite human sin, but rather to reveal a divine love to the human community. What a difference that distinction could make today in our churches. Christ suffered for humans not in their place, for God does not need to be reconciled to humanity, rather human beings needed to be reconciled to God. This is the great debate between the doctrines of atonement for original sin, vs. Jesus as a model who may have lived to show us how to love and died for political reasons.

Interesting is that this same debate, is Jesus a sacrificial lamb, or a model

on how we are to live, is going on today, most blatantly in Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion*. In Ballou's day, the debate was grounded in their idea of the universal love God. Universalism is the insistence that as God is unlimited, so God's love is also without bounds. It embraces all, and because God is all-powerful, it is not possible for any human being to frustrate God's love or God's design.

In some ways, David Bumbaugh writes, Ballou presented a way of thinking which offered a Calvinism turned on its head. Ballou's reason led him to deny the existence of the Trinity also. And this denial helped make the coming together of the Unitarians and the Universalists so much easier in 1961, as the Unitarians had already denied the Trinity, since the 1550's. It would be reasonable to assume that the liberal Christians who were part of the growing Unitarian movement might welcome the appearance of a potential ally in the Universalist in New England.

However, the impression from the Unitarians was that the Universalists came from the wrong side of the tracks, in a number of ways. Murray, Winchester, and the Ballous were all seen as itinerant preachers rather than as part of the settled religious order. For the most part, they were Baptists, while the Unitarians were Congregationalists, often from the largest, most prestigious, and wealthiest churches in New England. The Universalists ordinations were also thought to be irregular and considered suspect, because many of them had little or no formal education or seminary training, and their congregations were drawn from disaffected Baptists, Methodist, Quakers and German sects, all of their churches serving the lower social classes. And, of course they attacked the doctrine of hell, which many liberal Christians saw as useful to support social order, whether or not it was theologically justifiable. UU historian David Bambaugh tells us, "The liberal Christians who would become Unitarians interpreted early Universalism as part of the revivalist phenomenon, another form of the enthusiastic religion which had aroused so much tumult and had so unsettled the standing order of things in New England." Unitarians failed to see that they had much, if anything in common. As a consequence, the Unitarians failed to welcome Universalism totally, despite the fact that the Universalists were already staunch Unitarians.

And even after Murray's death in 1817, and Hosea Ballou moved to Boston to become minister of the Second Universalist Society and was to become one of the most popular preachers in the city, as well as a central figure in his denomination, he and the Universalist failed to capture the attention of the Unitarians in Boston until 100 years later, sadly in need of the Universalists capital, the Unitarians consented to the merger. Adin Ballou was busy during this time also. Cousin to Hosea, Adin was instrumental in founding the utopian Hopedale Community in 1841. Places

like this tried to follow Christian truths through alternative modes of social and economic ways of living. As we look at history, we need to remember, all organizations, whether religious or not, do not have one seamless fabric of history. No, there are many splits and disagreements along the way.

Adin and other Universalists ministers broke away from Hosea in 1831, saying Hosea's Universalism was too ultra for them, and feared that Hosea's doctrine of no future punishment might invite moral laxity in people. But Adin also had his problems with his followers, as he was considered too pacifist in his views of war and violence. And yet today many consider Adin's theory of political nonresistance as one of the earliest and most persuasive version of political nonresistance in the UU tradition.

The Universalists were a brave lot. They were ahead of everyone in America on the issues of nonviolence and women's rights. And their most outstanding statement of course was when the Universalists church ordained the Rev. Olympia Brown, in 1863 being the first woman ordained in America with full denominational authority and she was a Universalist.

What made the Great Awakening such a success I believe, is something the fundamentalists have understood better than anyone trying to refute them, and that is, that in the realm of the spiritual/the biological, the visceral, the emotional always has much more impact.

A religious principle lead by a biological image will always be the more popular. That could be why Jonathan Edward's sermon *Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God* is more remembered than anything done by any other preacher at that time. His sermon has within it the five senses, the metaphors that take the imagination to hell, powerlessness and back again. You can almost feel the flames of hell licking your heels. It is vital, it is violent, it is virulent, and that makes it dangerous and popular. Like the movie by Mel Gibson, *The Passion of Christ*, Gibson understood this very old and basic tenant of human nature, if you want some doctrine, some set of guidelines to be felt, remembered and make a lasting impression, you must present it to people in their biological/emotional level first. Maybe that is why our church is not a bigger religious church in America, we have dwelt in our heads too long and have forgotten about our hearts, our senses, the biological, or our emotions.

So, Mel Gibson used the same ploy that Jonathan Edwards used back in the 1700's, hit people in their stomachs with the religious principle you want them to remember. *The Passion* is the perfect mixture, a popular movie actor who directed and paid for the movie, who tells the story of growing up a strict Catholic and losing his way through fame and fortune

to wealth and drink and despair until he says, "I fell to my knees and returned to the rigid Catholicism of my youth." Mel says it was Jesus' suffering that saved his life. Mel is there, in biological religion. In 1991 he built his own Catholic church in Malibu, California, near his home.

With this movie, we must ask if Mel Gibson has reinvented Jesus in his own image? The critics have said the movie lacks a sense of context and character development. What it does have is two hours of uninterrupted violence, blood and despair. I see so many parallels here with the Edwards/Ballou story. If Mel wants to stay at the bottom of the cross, as Edwards did, that is their decision, but we have come to know there is another part of this story and that is the resurrection, or as Ballou would say, the saving grace of love.

Each of us has a choice in religious language or in our own lives, of deciding, do we want to stay at the bottom of the cross of endings and despair that we all have felt that are a part of life, or do we also remember and recognize the truly beautiful and saving parts of the story of our lives as lived out in the resurrections, the lessons, the grace and love that has been given to us. It's like Jonathon Edwards wanted to live in the fear and terror of hell, while Murray, the Ballous and Relly wanted to live in God's love.

Mel Gibson's movie and the sermon *Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God*, and so forth is the atonement theory as it comes from the theological writings of a theologian named Anselm in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Also called the substitution theology. It talks of God's anger and rage at human's sin, demanding restitution in the form of the death of his son. Thomas Jefferson thought this nonsense as he also cut out all of Jesus' miracles in his copy of the Bible. He was part of the new wave of writers who wished to see Jesus as a human being and one who rather modeled how we are to be truly human.

The basic question at the bottom of the Universalist/Fundamentalist split in the 17-1800's and of the Mel Gibson/and his critics split, and the fundamentalist/liberal split of today, is the same, is Jesus' death that which saves believers, or was his life the model that taught us how to be really human? And how we answer that question could be the difference between a life lived in the fear of hell, or a life lived in the blessed love of a God who would let nothing separate you from that love. Or a life lived within reason and the blessed hope that nothing can separate us from the balance reason can give us.

Our belief as UUs that life is good, comes from the gift of those early Universalists who would not put their belief in hell, or the fear of hell, but lifted their eyes and hearts to the heavens and said we can be happy in

this life and ready to live it in mercy, justice and peace. May it also be so for us. Amen